

**PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA**

NEWS RELEASE

Oct. 24, 2007

Commissioners Wefald, Cramer and Clark

****For Immediate Release****

Phone 701-328-2400

Consumer issues are a top priority of the Public Service Commission

The North Dakota Public Service Commission received a steady flow of consumer contacts in the past year, ranging from questions about utility bills to requests for assistance preventing vital services from being disconnected.

In this year's annual consumer contact report, which covers Sept. 1, 2006 to Aug. 31, 2007, the commission recorded 918 contacts.

Each call, letter or e-mail is handled by a staff member who investigates the question or complaint, and if needed, works with companies to reach a resolution.

Susan Wefald, who is president of the commission and holds the consumer affairs portfolio, said public contacts provide valuable information to the agency.

“The public acts as our eyes and ears among the industries we regulate,” Wefald said. “Having a working relationship with the public is one of the most important aspects of our jobs as regulators.”

The majority of contacts are from citizens who need help solving a problem with a utility company. The commission regulates investor-owned gas and electric companies and telecommunications companies.

The commission's Public Utilities Division handled 817 of the contacts, which included 507 contacts regarding telecommunications and 271 calls regarding gas and electric utilities.

There were 120 contacts from people seeking assistance to prevent their utilities from being disconnected, an increase of 17 from last year's report. In many cases involving pending disconnections, commission staff has been able to buy consumers more time to pay their bills by negotiating a payment arrangement between the consumer and the company.

Commissioner Kevin Cramer said people should call the commission when they are unable to work out an arrangement with utility companies.

“A quick call to the Public Service Commission can potentially save customers the hassle of having their services disconnected and the expense of reconnecting service later,” Cramer said.

Investor-owned gas and electric utilities are required by law to give their customers a 10-day notice before they disconnect service, and they cannot disconnect customers on Fridays, weekends, holidays, the day before holidays and in the afternoon on any day. Telecommunications companies are required to provide a 10-day notice before disconnecting essential services, which includes local calling and 911.

Although the commission has limited jurisdiction over cellular phone companies, it takes an active consumer advocacy role in the industry by working with companies to resolve complaints. Of the 507 calls regarding telecommunications companies, about 140 involved cell phone companies. Telecommunications contacts include questions about billing, quality of service, federal assistance programs and availability of service.

The commission also continued to receive a steady flow of surveys through its Zap the Gap initiative. The surveys, which can be found on the commission's website, www.psc.state.nd.us, help the commission identify deficiencies in cellular coverage around the state. In a tally separate from the consumer contact report, a total of 201 Zap the Gap surveys were entered into the system during the reporting period.

In addition to the surveys, the commission travels to communities and holds town hall meetings with citizens as part of Zap the Gap. The commission uses the information gathered through the initiative to urge companies build cellular towers in specific areas.

Commissioner Tony Clark, who holds the telecommunications portfolio, encourages participation in Zap the Gap.

“We encourage all communities in need of better cell phone service to take part in the Zap the Gap surveys,” Clark said. “Cellular coverage continues to improve overall, but there is still room for improvement.”

The commission also has jurisdiction over auctioneers, grain buyers, mine reclamation, pipelines, weights and measures and railroads.

The commission licenses grain buyers and auctioneers and has limited jurisdiction over railroads. There were 66 contacts concerning licensing and rail issues in the report. Other contacts include 24 for weights and measures, 10 for mine reclamation and 18 for utility siting issues.

For more information about the commission call 328-2400 or visit www.psc.state.nd.us.

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